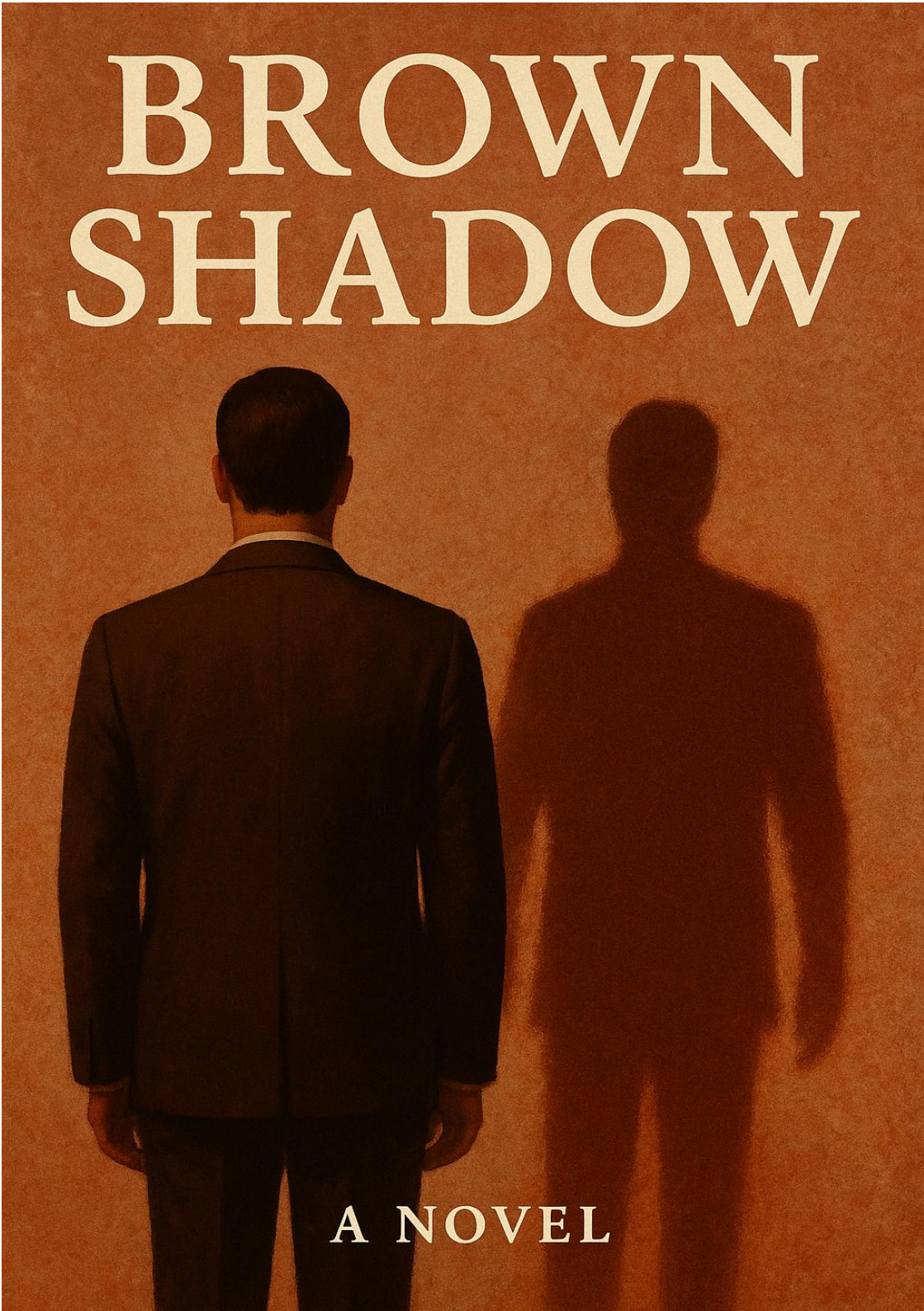
BROWN SHADOW



A NOVEL

BROWN SHADOW

He was such a piece of shit that even his shadow was brown. You know the kind: the human equivalent of a corporate PowerPoint—animated, verbose, and utterly devoid of soul. His idea of charisma was using your name twice in a sentence. His laugh? It had the same sincerity as a "This call may be recorded for quality purposes."

He was one of those who sets meetings at quarters of hours—10:15, 11:45—because ten or eleven-thirty were for mortals. The 15, however, made it look like there was a chain of invisible obligations behind him, some greater machinery of importance in which his minute hand was a divine instrument.

He'd make his secretary call you to invite you to his birthday, then make *you* thank *her* for

the honor. His birthday, naturally, would be "a networking opportunity."

He'd refuse to lend you his fountain pen for a signature, holding it like it was the sword in the stone. "One does not borrow a fountain pen," he'd say, pausing dramatically, "innit so?" And yes, he'd actually say "innit so?"—a linguistic abortion only tolerated among people who call espresso "expresso."

He became a teacher to apply exams, not to teach; a manager to issue orders, not to lead; a father to dictate bedtimes, not to raise children. If he ever got a dog, it was purely for the leash—a living, breathing exclamation mark on his control fetish.

He said "production goals" the way priests say "salvation." He said "mission statement" like it was scripture. *Mission. Vision. Values.* He believed in those words, capital letters and all. To him, they were the new Ten

Commandments, handed down not from Sinai but from an HR PowerPoint with a gradient background and stock photos of diverse, smiling people holding puzzle pieces.

And when he took a vacation, he didn't choose a place—he chose a **Leisure Package**. Snorkeling. Golf. "Cultural immersion" (a day trip to a nearby market with Wi-Fi). The kind of man who wouldn't walk on a beach without checking if it had a Tripadvisor rating.

Nathan met him once. Once was enough. The man's handshake felt like a quarterly report—dry, mandatory, and full of meaningless metrics. Nathan washed his hand afterward, twice, and swore he could still smell "team-building exercises" on his skin.

His shadow was so brown that day it left skid marks on the pavement. And, in that radiant shade of managerial diarrhea, he had his secretary invite Nathan to a *meeting*—on a

Friday, at **16:15**. Repeat that slowly, with the proper disgust: *Friday. Sixteen-fifteen.*

The corporate Sabbath Eve. The sacred hour of escape. And this bipedal spreadsheet wanted a *meeting*.

But—technically—it was just an *invitation*. Which, in corporate dialect, means a passive-aggressive command delivered through a terrified intermediary with a headset and zero medical coverage.

Nathan, who was **not corporate**, took a deep breath, adjusted the jazz in the background, and gave the only reasonable reply known to free men.
He told the secretary, in the warmest, most professional tone,
"Please do me a kindness and pass my middle finger up to your boss. And suggest, if it's not too much trouble, that he go sit on a traffic cone until his buttocks meet at the base."

The secretary, who had long ago sold her soul for dental insurance, said: “I’ll… phrase it diplomatically.”
Nathan: “No need. The message is already ergonomic.”

It was a meeting—*a meeting!*—to organize a fund to pay Nathan’s **taxes**.
His *OnlyFans* and *Instagram* taxes, mind you.
Because Nathan, being the rare and endangered species of moral masochist, insisted on paying them even when the system politely whispered, *“You know you could just… not.”*

To most, “taxation is theft.”
To Nathan, “taxation is theft” ranked somewhere between “flat Earth” and “pineapple doesn’t belong on pizza” in the great landfill of stupid opinions.
For him, it wasn’t theft—it was rent.
He was paying his monthly fee to live in a society where people weren’t dying in the

streets holding a half-charged vape pen and a GoFundMe link.

Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., Supreme Court Justice, had said:

“Taxes are what we pay for civilized society.”

Nathan agreed.
Not out of patriotism—he’d rather swallow thumbtacks than feel patriotic—but out of sheer, practical decency.
He’d meditated long enough behind the **veil of ignorance**—that philosophical invisibility cloak where you imagine not knowing whether you’d be born as a CEO or a street sweeper.
And when he finally lifted the veil, he chose:
“Yeah, fine. I’ll pay. I want hospitals that don’t smell like despair, schools that don’t leak asbestos, and garbage trucks that actually come. I like paved roads, and I like people not dying on them.”

He didn't want to live in the libertarian utopia of potholes, private ambulances, and influencer philosophers selling detox plans. He wanted a civilization—not a YouTube channel.

So he paid. Every cent.
And now, this meeting of brown-shadowed bureaucrats was being convened *for him*—to "help" him pay what he was already paying.
It was like organizing a fundraiser for someone who already bought their own coffin, engraved, polished, and pre-booked the eulogy.

The shit-shadowed CEO couldn't comprehend Nathan any more than a tick understands why the dog scratches back.
Hence, the meeting.

He was a man fluent only in spreadsheets and subterfuge. His native tongue was *offshore*. His religion: *fiduciary opacity*.
He'd spent his career helping blood-thirsty cutthroats—also known, in polite society, as

bankers—launder billions through jurisdictions so small you could sneeze and hit their GDP. He knew every tax haven like a lover: the Cayman Islands, Luxembourg, the Isle of Man—each with its own perverse charm, like exotic mistresses who whispered in numbered accounts.

And now, for the first time, someone was asking him to **create a fund not to avoid taxes, but to pay them.**
Not to hide wealth, but to expose it.
To *proactively* fund civilization.

It was an existential glitch.
A cataclysmic event in the moral physics of finance.
You could see the tremor in his PowerPoint hand. His quarterly soul, accustomed to ROI, couldn't process the concept of virtue without profit.

He asked, voice quivering, “So… you’re saying we’d… collect money to… give it *back* to the government?”
Nathan nodded serenely.
“To pay taxes, yes. On my earnings.”
“Voluntarily?”
“Yes.”
“Without an audit?”
“Yes.”
“Without a PR angle?”
“Yes.”
The CEO blinked twice, like a man hearing bagpipes in a submarine.

“Mr. Nathan,” he said, taking off his glasses like a judge in a bad film, “you realize that what you are proposing is—financially speaking—heresy.”
Nathan smiled. “I know. I call it *basic decency*.”

A silence followed so heavy you could hear capitalism itself shifting uncomfortably in its

leather chair.
The CEO finally broke it: “Do you… expect a return?”
Nathan: “Sure. Clean streets, healthy people, and maybe a little less existential dread when I see a hospital.”
The CEO wrote something on his notepad: “Subject suffers from acute socialism.”

Nice. Let’s slice the beast open and name the cuts. Keep it clean, brutal, and grimly funny — like a morgue with better lighting.

Taxonomy of Thieves (modern Western edition)

Premise: every human category contains thieves. They don’t all mug you with a knife — some mug you with policy, contracts, PR, or a smiling spreadsheet. Violence ≠ only blood. Each class has its preferred weapon.

1) The Bottom—Street and Survival Thieves

Labels: poor, dispossessed, informal economy.
Weapon: blunt, immediate physical violence.
How they steal: purse-snatches, home robberies, gangs, mugging with knife/gun/machete, breaking into cars.
Logic: scarcity breeds speed. Theft = direct appropriation of someone else's things to survive tonight.
Signature line: "Give me the phone or I don't eat."
Effect: immediate harm, visible scars, headlines that make middle-class people lock their doors harder.

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2) The Grabbed-By-Hours — Precarious Workers / Lower-Middle

Labels: underpaid, gig-workers, temp.
Weapon: coercive labor practices (shadow

violence).
How they steal: wage theft, unpaid overtime, cash-under-table, subcontracting to dodge responsibility.
Logic: survival via exploitation of time — they steal your rest, your future pension, your ability to say no.
Signature line: "You'll be grateful for the opportunity."
Effect: slow attrition — burned bodies, debt, ruined futures.

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3) The Managerial Class — Middle-class Thieves

Labels: middling managers, HR, middle management, small-corporate execs.
Weapon: *management violence* — policies, KPIs, scheduling, micro-bureaucracy.
How they steal: underpay staff while extracting productivity; manufacture "performance

improvement plans"; shift costs to workers (benefits cuts, temp contracts); bully with mandatory weekend "touch base" calls.
Logic: theft by organization. It's legal-ish, habitual, and justified by slide decks.
Signature line: "We have a mission; deliverable by EOD."
Effect: morale rot, normalized precarity, resentment disguised as "lean operations."

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4) The Professional Exploiters — White-collar Thieves

Labels: lawyers-for-hire, accountants, mid-level financiers, consultants.
Weapon: legalism and paperwork.
How they steal: tax loopholes, creative accounting, exploit regulatory gray areas, siphon value through complex contracts.
Logic: if you can draft it, you can take it. They make theft look like cleverness.

Signature line: “It’s all compliant with section 12b.”
Effect: invisible hemorrhage of public and private wealth into shells and bonuses.

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5) The High-Class Highway Robbers — Capital & Oligarchs

Labels: CEOs, private equity, sovereign-adjacent funds, owners of things.
Weapon: structural violence — debt, market capture, policy-capture, tax havens.
How they steal: buy public infrastructure, extract monopoly rents, offshore profits, buy legislators, engineer bailouts; privatize profits, socialize losses.
Logic: system design as a pickpocket. You don’t mug someone; you redesign the street so every passerby trips into your pockets.
Signature line: “Shareholder value is our fiduciary duty.”

Effect: concentration of wealth, defunded public services, ecological and social collapse framed as “efficiency.”

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6) Institutional & Ideological Thieves

Labels: certain politicians, media conglomerates, credentialed elites.
Weapon: narrative and regulation.
How they steal: sell narratives that normalize theft (austerity narratives, “entrepreneurial” myth); manufacture consent; privatize commons by rebranding it as “efficiency.”
Logic: steal the story, and you steal the consent. Once truth is privatized, everything else follows.
Signature line: “We must tighten belts — for the economy.”
Effect: moral exhaustion, erosion of trust, shrinking imagination for alternatives.

7) The Techno-Abstractionists

Labels: platforms, ad networks, data brokers.
Weapon: algorithmic, infrastructural extraction.
How they steal: attention, data, labor disguised as "participation"; platform fees; opaque terms of service that cannibalize creators' incomes.
Logic: if you own the feed, you own the value; creators produce, platforms expropriate.
Signature line: "We're just enabling creators."
Effect: creators starve while platforms scale; value flows upstream to a handful of infra-owners.

Final truth (short & brutal)

They're all thieves. The only difference is the **scale**, **method**, and **plausible deniability**.

- Lowers steal with knives tonight.
- Middles steal your time and health over years.
- Highs steal public futures with contracts, lobbyists, and islands of secrecy.

Violence takes forms: **blood, time, law, narrative, infrastructure.** All valid; all violent. All part of the same economy of appropriation. The meek might get mugged; the meek might get mortgages; the meek might get managed out of a decent life by a PowerPoint.

And the neatest moral of the world? (You didn't ask for a moral, but here it is anyway, short and factual): change the street design and the highway robbers lose their lane. Or don't — and the theft just gets fancier.

The CEO sat frozen in his ergonomic chair, staring at Nathan like a man realizing he'd accidentally invited an exorcist to brunch.

Nathan, meanwhile, was warming to his subject — one leg crossed, cigarette waving like punctuation.

"The problem, my dear *stercum man,*" Nathan began, "isn't the thieves, or the classes, or the goddamn mission statements. The problem is the *idea* that anyone still believes in fairness. One should really study the works of one of the great thinkers of the twentieth century — George Carlin."

He didn't wait for acknowledgment. The monologue came out smooth, like whiskey on an empty stomach:

"Boy, everyone's running around yammering about their fucking rights. 'I have a right, you have a right, we have a right.' Folks, I hate to spoil your fun, but there's no such thing as rights. They're imaginary. We made 'em up. Like the boogeyman. Like the Three Little Pigs, Pinocchio, Mother Goose — shit like

that. Rights are an idea. Cute idea. But that's all. Cute… and fictional."

The CEO blinked twice.
Nathan went on, eyes shining with the ecstatic glow of a man who's quoting holy scripture in an unholy place.

"And if you think you *do* have rights," he said, "where do they come from? People say: 'They come from God. They're God-given rights.' Ah, fuck, here we go again. The God excuse — the last refuge of a man with no answers and no argument."

At this point, the CEO's temples were pulsing in Morse code. His mind, conditioned by decades of profit-loss dialectics, tried to find a spreadsheet cell where "rights" could be quantified. It couldn't. Nathan didn't stop.

"Rights aren't rights if someone can take 'em away. What we've got is a bill of *temporary*

privileges. And if you read the news — even badly — you know the list gets shorter. And shorter. And shorter."

Nathan sipped his drink like punctuation, then continued, calm and lethal:

"Sooner or later, people are gonna realize the government doesn't give a fuck about them. Never did. Doesn't care about you, your kids, your rights, your safety, your welfare. All it cares about is *power.* Keeping it, and expanding it wherever possible. Personally, I think when it comes to rights, either we've got unlimited rights — or none at all."

The CEO's jaw slackened. He wasn't sure whether Nathan was insane, brilliant, or recruiting for a cult of functioning nihilists. He thought briefly — tenderly — of the .38 in his bottom drawer. It gleamed in memory like a promise of silence.

But Nathan leaned forward, smiling the smile of a man who'd just demolished the concept of society and was about to order dessert. "So," Nathan said, "how's your *Mission, Vision, Values* holding up?"

The CEO sat motionless — part wax figure, part open browser tab trying to process too many incompatible truths. Nathan, however, was still in full flow, his tone halfway between Socratic dialogue and barroom heresy.

"My point is," Nathan went on, gesturing with the cigarette like a deranged conductor, "I *don't* think people have the right to equal opportunities, good education, healthcare, or clean running water. Rights, my dear Chief Executive Dung Beetle, are decorative. Lace curtains on a burning building. I say — let's grow a pair. Man up. *Man up into decent men.* And make the damn society that makes those things *real.*"

He paused long enough for the ash to fall — perfectly timed punctuation.

"How can I do my miserable, microscopic, pathetic little drop-in-the-ocean part?" he said, smirking. "Simple. I pay taxes. Like a normal, decent person. That's my daily confession, my civic ejaculation. I pay my dues to civilization so I can walk down a street that doesn't smell like despair and meet humans who've seen a dentist this decade."

He leaned forward, elbows on the CEO's polished mahogany desk, eyes alight with mischievous sanity.
"See my point, my little *CEDB*? Chief Executive Dung Beetle?"

The CEO blinked, once. His lips moved but words refused to cooperate. He looked as though Nathan had just recited Nietzsche through a kazoo.

Nathan kept going, merciless:
"You roll around in other people's shit and call it management. I pick up my own and call it participation in civilization. We're both handling excrement, my friend — I just prefer mine processed through a sewer system I helped fund."

The CEO briefly considered whether firing Nathan was an option, then remembered Nathan wasn't even *employed* by him. He wasn't even in the building legally, technically. He'd just walked in, uninvited, with an espresso and a moral stance.

Nathan stood up, flicked the cigarette into the CEO's empty "Vision 2030" mug, and said quietly, "The difference between us, chief, is I don't need a shadow to prove I exist. You've got a whole brown one following you around."

The CEO blinked, the way a cow might blink at a passing bullet train. His lips parted, but only

a faint managerial wheeze escaped — the kind produced by decades of climate-controlled hypocrisy.

Nathan, smiling like a man who'd just delivered a sermon to a brick wall, leaned back in the chair and crossed his legs.
"So," he said, tapping the table with two fingers, "will you do the job I'm hiring you for, or do I have to become that meme?"

The CEO squinted. "What meme?"

Nathan grinned wider, almost tenderly. "You know. The one with the guy waving cash at a vendor who's too stupid to take it. '**Shut up and take my money**.' That's me, right now. Except instead of buying a gadget that tracks my sleep cycles, I'm trying to pay for civilization. And you — *you* — are standing in the way like a confused toaster."

The CEO's mouth opened, closed, opened again. The neural equivalent of dial-up connection noises filled the room.
He stammered, "Mr. Nathan, I··· I'm not sure I understand what exactly you're proposing."

"I'm proposing," Nathan said, rising slowly, "that you stop laundering bullshit and start laundering decency. You help me set up a fund that pays taxes — *voluntarily.* The world's first Pro-Civilization Laundromat. You'll get to clean money by actually cleaning it. You can even keep your commission if you promise not to spend it on a yacht."

The CEO looked like a man being force-fed a new religion through his ear. "You understand that's— that's not how it's done."

Nathan smiled. "Exactly. That's why I came to you. You know how it *is* done. I know how it *should* be done. Somewhere in between, maybe we make history. Or at least irony."

The CEO adjusted his tie, now a noose in disguise. “I’ll··· need to run this by Legal.”

Nathan turned to leave, lighting another cigarette on his way out.
“Sure,” he said. “Tell Legal civilization’s calling. It’s on line two.”

The CEO just stared—speechless, motionless, soul evacuated. Nathan, unbothered, looked around the office as if searching for a “moral clarity” light switch, found none, and sighed.

“Well then,” he said, brushing invisible dust from his jacket, “if you’ll excuse me, I have to record my laest Instagram commercial—the one that’ll eventually funnel money into the tax fund, and therefore into your dirty, shit-layered, dingleberry-decorated pockets.”

The CEO made a small noise—half gasp, half PowerPoint error tone.
Nathan ignored him, already unpacking.

Out came a **phone**, a **tiny tripod**, and a **portable light ring**—the Holy Trinity of 21st-century revelation.
He positioned them neatly on the CEO's conference table, between the Mission Statement plaque and the model yacht labeled *Integrity*.

Then, with a small electronic click, **hipster indie music** filled the silence.
Soft guitar. Pretentious optimism. The soundtrack of people who think minimalism is a personality.

Nathan's face appeared in the glow—calm, angelic, influencer-ready.

Nathan (angel voice):
"Are you tired too of adulting? Is the world too difficult for you too? Follow me—my advice will blow your mind."

Then the shift.
The eyes hardened.
The voice dropped half an octave and lost all mercy.

Nathan (dead serious):
“Get a fucking job, sissy cunt.
Drink tequila in the morning to make the pain go away.
Build a better world around you.
Don’t hit on anyone smaller than your size.
Punch a son of a bitch in the face from time to time.
Quit whining.
Grow a pair.”

He paused, smiled faintly, raised his middle finger to the camera like a saint blessing the unworthy, and ended the recording.

Click. Silence.

He turned back to the CEO, who looked like he'd just witnessed the Book of Revelation performed by Bukowski at a TED Talk.

"Marketing," Nathan said, pocketing his phone. "It's all about authenticity these days."

Then he walked out, leaving the faint scent of tequila, cigarette smoke, and moral coherence.